



Gratz Insider, April 2015 - Story Continuation

[To return to the newsletter, close this page.]

Re-envisioning Part-Time Jewish Education at Gratz and Beyond

In 2013, under a grant from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia (JFGP), Gratz launched an initiative called NEXT (**N**ew **EX**cellent Teacher Training), conceived of and directed by Rabbi Erin Hirsh, a nationally known Jewish educator with over 20 years of experience in the field. NEXT seeks to improve the quality of Jewish education by providing religious school educators with much-needed instruction in pedagogy and Jewish content. At the heart of the NEXT program are highly practical online classes that offer teachers both flexibility and affordability. In fact, several hundred teachers have already participated in NEXT programs in 11 states plus Canada.

In addition to NEXT, Rabbi Hirsh is currently leading Gratz College in another initiative to revitalize part-time Jewish education. At the request of JFGP, the College is collaborating with Jewish Learning Venture to develop model religious school programs for Philadelphia-area students in kindergarten through seventh grade.

Rabbi Hirsh and her counterpart at Jewish Learning Venture, Elana Rivel, began this project by seeking input from all relevant stakeholders - students, parents, educators, rabbis and community leaders. Operating under the motto of “listen for change,” they organized a unique youth summit at Gratz College, which was attended by 104 students, representing 24 synagogue schools, as well as the Gratz Jewish Community High School. A community-wide youth summit of this size and breadth focusing on Jewish education is an extraordinary and unprecedented event.

The students at the summit provided valuable feedback on how they would shape religious school education going forward. Among the more surprising results was their overwhelming support for weekly classes, as opposed to longer but more infrequent meetings. Gratz and Jewish Learning Venture also organized two other successful discussion groups: a parent focus group and a summit of teachers and congregational leaders from synagogues throughout the Philadelphia region. (Click [here](#) for a brief video from the youth summit and the parent focus group.)

Hirsh and Rivel have since analyzed all of this data. Taking what they’ve learned, they submitted a proposal to the Federation for the funding of a fifth-grade curriculum to be piloted in approximately six supplementary schools next year.

Finally, Gratz is making some major changes to its own supplementary school program, the Gratz Jewish Community High School (JCHS). As explained by President Joy Goldstein in her recent op-ed in The Jewish Exponent, the goal of these changes is to consolidate JCHS on the Mandell campus, where it can capitalize on Gratz’s tremendous educational resources and create a vibrant community for the students. (Read Goldstein’s article [here](#).)

As of next fall, all high school instruction will be centralized at Mandell; Gratz will close its satellite branches, effective this summer. This decision was arrived at very thoughtfully in light of the declining

enrollment in the branches, the economic inefficiencies inherent in the branch system, the growing trend of synagogues joining together to form collaborative Hebrew high school programs, and the social and academic advantages of centralization at Mandell. For teens hindered by the distance to the Mandell Campus, Gratz is working on options, including online educational offerings and consultative support for those branch synagogues that are now planning to develop their own programs.

As Goldstein explained in her letter to JCHS parents, “We have had to make some difficult choices, but they are counterbalanced by opportunities to develop compelling programs for teens.”

The restructured high school program will offer new curricula resonating with contemporary relevance. While still being able to earn teaching certificates and study Hebrew as they have in the past, students will also have the option to pursue high-caliber, academically rigorous college-level courses and to interact with peers from all over the Philadelphia region.

“JCHS and the College have worked like silos in the past,” says Rabbi Hirsh. “Now there will be synergistic connections between them for the benefit of our students.”

In fact, the NEXT program and the new high school program will be housed within the same department under Rabbi Hirsh’s direction. With high school teachers receiving pedagogical support from NEXT and substantive academic support from Gratz College professors, the new high school classes will be highly dynamic and enriching.

From NEXT to the youth and adult summits to the planned changes at JCHS, we at Gratz College have clearly been doing much thinking about supplementary school education. And, it’s a topic worthy of serious reflection. Through quality Jewish education, young people are better positioned to develop and maintain a strong and ongoing commitment to the Jewish community.